

Accomplishments to Date

The FTF Strategic Communications Plan for Fiscal Years 2011 to 2013 was presented at the April 27 Board meeting.

The plan and implementation timeline were shared with the Regional Partnership Council Chairs, Vice Chairs, Regional Coordinators and Regional Managers on May 6. This presentation included detailed implementation information, as well as documents to support Regional Council discussions/decision-making on regional options. The presentation also included the distribution to all 31 Regional Partnership Councils of 20,000 postcards (total) with general information about FTF and an invitation to sign up for FTF email alerts.

The Communications Team continues to work with Moses Anshell on refinement of the creative concept based on input from the Board and Regional Councils, as well as moving forward with production logistics associated with the various components of the advertising campaign. Completion of other tactics identified for May – including the brand assets and style guide and the communications tool kit – is on schedule. Implementation of one tactic – branded email updates – was completed ahead of schedule. The first fully branded FTF email alert was sent out April 30, 2010.

Media Relations

First Things First continued to receive positive press coverage regarding its offer to support a voter-approved fund transfer to assist with the state's budget deficit. That coverage included:

- Childhood program offers state \$300 million loan (Arizona Republic, April 16, 2010)
- State should take up loan offer (Arizona Republic Editorial, April 23)
- State's GOP leaders ignoring clear priorities of voters (Arizona Republic, Linda Valdez Column, April 17)

Director Allvin was interviewed May 6 by two representatives of the Arizona Capitol Times for an article regarding the November ballot initiative. That article is expected to be published in two weeks.

In addition, FTF Regional Partnership Councils and grantees continue to earn media surrounding their local efforts, as well. Those articles/stories include:

- First Things First in Trouble: Could Affect Community's Child Development Programs (Au-Authm Action News, April 15)
- An appearance by Cochise Regional Council Chair Jane Strain and Vice Chair David Howe on Channel 97 in Ft. Huachuca
- My Child's Ready, an integrated effort of the Southeast Maricopa Regional Council's family support grantees, was featured twice on the online edition of *Raising Arizona Kids*, and their video advertisement is available on You Tube.
- Statewide Study Targeting Children, Families (UA Now online, April 14)

Social Media

We continue to make regular updates to our Facebook page to keep the community conversation on the importance of early childhood going. Since the last Board meeting, we have increased our number of Facebook fans from to almost 800.

Liz Barker Alvarez – (602) 771-5063

Childhood program offers state \$300 million loan

by Mary Jo Pitzl - Apr. 16, 2010

The Arizona Republic

The state could get a \$300 million interest-free loan from an early childhood program and up to \$60 million to pay for KidsCare in exchange for dropping plans to redirect the group's money.

The board of First Things First on Friday voted to make the offer to the Legislature to help balance the budget.

First Things First is a voter-approved program to provide early childhood education and health coverage. It is funded by an 80-cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes, and more than \$480 million has flowed into the agency.

The group late last year offered to lend the state money, an idea that Gov. Jan Brewer incorporated into her budget proposal but which lawmakers rejected.

Instead, the Legislature sent to the November ballot a measure seeking voter approval to keep the tobacco tax in place but to allow lawmakers to redirect where it is spent.

House Majority Leader John McComish, R-Phoenix, called the board's offer "a step in the right direction" and said lawmakers would examine the proposal when they return to work Monday.

"I think there's interest in middle ground," McComish said.

McComish said this offer is different than the earlier loan proposal because it does not include interest, although the repayment schedule would have to be approved by voters. In addition, First Things First is willing to dip into its coffers and give the state \$60 million for KidsCare, a children's health-care program that lawmakers eliminated last month.

The \$60 million would cover the state's obligation for up to three years.

"They're sitting on a big pile of cash, they should be willing to help us," McComish said, reflecting legislative sentiment that the program has hoarded its money while the state budget has struggled with deficits.

In exchange for the \$60 million and the loan, the First Things First board is asking lawmakers to retract the ballot measure and drop another resolution advancing in the Legislature. That measure would allow lawmakers to tap up to 50 percent of voter-approved funds to help balance the budget.

State should take up loan offer

Apr. 23, 2010 12:00 AM

The Arizona Republic

The early years of life, from birth to 5, have a powerful influence on children's success later on. That's why voters approved First Things First, the early-childhood program funded by a cigarette tax.

Legislators should stop trying to hijack it to plug the state's budget gap.

Instead, they should take up an offer from the First Thing First's board: a \$300 million loan and up to \$60 million to fund KidsCare for 2 1/2 years, subject to voter approval.

The proposal has a double advantage. It's a reasonable way to get help from First Things First's large reserves without demolishing a valuable program. And it would give added resources to KidsCare, allowing the health program to cover all eligible children.

The option is a much better choice than the one currently going through the Legislature, which would restore enough funding to meet federal requirements but freeze enrollment, leaving thousands of Arizona kids without medical coverage.

First Things First had its growing pains, including a slow startup and a scattershot approach. But the focus is sharpening under new Executive Director Rhian Evans Allvin.

It makes no sense to pull the plug now that the program is rolling out grants and initiatives to promote quality child care and children's health.

Going forward, First Things First must demonstrate that it is well-managed and effective. Otherwise, it will remain a target.

The Legislature has approved a ballot measure asking voters to discontinue First Things First and put the money into the general fund, the basic state budget.

The proposition is hardly a slam-dunk, especially with fierce opposition from children's advocates.

Lawmakers should rescind that measure and replace it with the loan/grant proposal from First Things First, which also has a much better chance of passing.

State's GOP leaders ignoring clear priorities of the voters

by Linda Valdez, Republic columnist - Apr. 17, 2010

The Arizona Republic

TUCSON

Arizona voters have been remarkably clear about their priorities. They support nature, open spaces, public schools, health care for the poor and early-childhood education.

The evidence is written in the state's recent history.

But for some reason, Arizona's Republican governor and the Republican leadership in the Legislature either can't read what the voters have written - or don't care to follow the instructions.

Consider the evidence.

Twenty years ago, voters created the Heritage Fund and directed Lottery money to parks and conservation.

This year, Republicans seized Heritage parks money.

In 1998, voters approved another ballot measure designed to preserve open spaces.

In November, lawmakers want you to give them the money for their priorities.

Lawmakers also want you to eliminate a program that was created by voters just four years ago. It's called First Things First and it helps kids get ready for kindergarten. So far it has raised \$485 million with a tax on tobacco.

This is a lesson in how to raise money - even in a recession.

Arizona's GOP majority didn't take the cue.

Too bad.

Arizona faces a crisis of too little revenue. The state's revenue has fallen by one-third in the past three years. But the GOP leadership refused to do the tough job of raising taxes. It took them a year just to - grudgingly - shrug that job over to voters, who will be asked, on May 18, to approve a temporary 1-cent-per-dollar sales-tax increase.

GOP lawmakers ignored voters' priorities. But they did find the nerve to propose that voters give them the First Things First money for their priorities, which include corporate tax breaks.

In 1999, Arizona voters agreed to raise the sales tax to help public schools. Yet this year, lawmakers slashed funding for public education, ended funding for all-day kindergarten and cut university budgets.

And GOP lawmakers still weren't finished ignoring voters' wishes.

A decade ago, the people of Arizona said they wanted the state's Medicaid program to provide health care to everyone at or below the federal poverty level. This year, Gov. Jan Brewer and the GOP Legislature decided they'd rather save some cash by kicking 310,000 people off the plan.

This makes sense only if politicians don't care about the will of the people. But I suspect they would deny that. For many years, I have participated in interviews of political candidates as part of *The Arizona Republic* Editorial Board. I cannot remember one time when a politician said he or she was running for office in order to defy the will of voters.

What happens to these guys when they take office?

Voters have given clear directions about what they want done. Political officeholders, who are supposed to be public servants, should be paying attention to the people who pay their salaries.

Republican lawmakers - and the governor - need to learn to follow instructions.

First Things First in Trouble: Could Affect Community's Child Development Programs

By Angela Willeford

Au-Authm Action News

Due to the slow economy and a budget deficit, the State of Arizona has already cut several programs and is looking at eliminating First Things First (FTF), a program designed to provide quality early-childhood development and education for Arizona children up to age 5, so that they are well-prepared to enter kindergarten.

In 2006, passage of Proposition 203 allowed funding for FTF through a tobacco sales tax, setting aside 80 cents per pack of cigarettes sold for the program.

Because Arizona voters approved the funding for the FTF program, they must also decide whether the program should be eliminated. On March 16, the Arizona Legislature decided to put the matter on the ballot in November. If the program were eliminated, it would mean \$350 million, the amount of money in the FTF reserve, will be redirected into the state's General Fund.

One criticism of FTF is that it has not distributed program grants in a timely manner and has a large reserve of unspent cash. Nadine Basha, FTF board member who pushed to get Proposition 203 on the ballot, has said that it has taken time to properly build and organize the agency's staff and volunteer regional council members, and to research the needs of infants and toddlers in FTF's 31 regions across Arizona. Since a tax generated from tobacco sales will eventually decrease, because smoking rates have slowly been declining over the years, the program's cash reserve helps ensure that FTF will be around for a while, said Yolanda Adams, coordinator of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Regional Partnership Council.

If the FTF program is eliminated, it will affect child development and education programs for children across Arizona, including Salt River. FTF funds many programs in the Community, including a nine-month pre-K program. The cost to run the program would be \$160,000, including staff and a new playground located at the old Early Childhood Education Center (ECEC) building on Longmore and McDowell Road. If funds are eliminated, this program will no longer be possible.

Other Community programs funded by FTF include teaching of the Akimel O'odham and Xalychidom Piipaash language to 100 ECEC children with early literacy and language development.

The FTF funding also paid for pamphlets that were sent out to more than 175 parents, helping them understand their child's early learning and health needs. This is important, since FTF's main purpose is to help children prepare for kindergarten.

Another program FTF supports is emergency food boxes. They help more than 100 families with children under age 6 meet their nutritional needs.

To learn more about what you can do to support early-childhood investment in Arizona, visit www.azftf.gov or call your regional representative at (602) 771-4986.

First Things First Cochise Regional Partnership Council - Chair Jane Strain and Vice Chair David Howe talk about First Things First, on Channel 97 Ft. Huachuca

<http://www.vimeo.com/11482826>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2p2yJfWXM8>

My Child's Ready featured on Raising Arizona Kids online and You Tube

Channel 12: <http://www.raisingarizonakids.com/index.php?page=3.other.raising-arizona-kids-on-12News> - for this, click to the page & then click on the 2 My Child's Ready items

Cox Ad on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FRAd5X4fw>

Statewide Study Targeting Children, Families

First Things First evaluators at the UA and the two other state universities have begun recruiting thousands of children and their families for a new study to understand how they use child care services.

By La Monica Everett-Haynes, University Communications April 14, 2010

The University of Arizona is part of a statewide effort to interview and assess 8,600 children and their families to understand how they use early childhood services.

First Things First External Evaluation has begun the Longitudinal Child Study of Arizona, the first major study of its kind. The five-year project has a two-pronged goal of informing and recruiting children and families, and its evaluators are working to involve a broadly diverse population of participants.

In addition to following infants, toddlers, preschoolers and kindergartners, evaluators will study regulated and unregulated providers, primary caregivers and program administrators.

First Things First, created in response to the 2006 voter-approved Proposition 203, provides funding for early childhood development and health initiatives "in the interest of taking the next steps to make them better," said Ron Marx, the UA College of Education dean and the project's principal investigator.

Marx said prior studies have indicated that access to quality early childhood care benefits children, families and communities, resulting in higher educational attainment and income, reduced divorce rates, higher taxes paid and lower incarceration rates.

"But what we want to do is test those conjectures," he said, noting that while the study will last five years, it is designed to track youth through high school.

UA early childhood specialists and researchers are recruiting in Pima, Pinal, Cochise, Graham, Greenlee and Santa Cruz through December. Other evaluators for the project, also known as FTFEE, are located at Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University and are covering other regions of the state.

Caitlin Glass, an evaluation coordinator of the UA project, said assessments will be offered in English and Spanish.

"Our hope is that our external evaluation will help improve the health and education of children in Arizona," Glass said.

During the study, evaluators will conduct interviews with parents and legal guardians, assess children on health and development and collect information on child care centers and other providers. Participating families will receive a gift for contributing their time.

When completed, the study will offer a stronger view of how children develop and grow and the accessibility of early childhood services and how families use them.

"Even though we're evaluating the impact of FTF services, one way of understanding that impact is to also target non-FTF centers and homes," said Lena Malofeeva, FTFEE's director of evaluation, whose office is at the UA.

Malofeeva also said: "Arizona wants to know how children develop and learn when they are being cared for by a relative, a friend, or a neighbor."

Families may turn to unregulated providers for financial reasons, time constraints or because they trust their neighbor or friend, she said. Unregulated providers care for a small number of children and are not required to be certified or licensed. The study's findings would provide more conclusive information on why such decisions are made.

"Typically, unregulated care providers are not the focus in most studies," Malofeeva said, "so we don't want to exclude these groups."

Marx said Arizona will not be able to ensure that all providers are licensed and certified in the near future, so it is key to have more information about nregulated providers.

"There will always be a market niche for small home care providers where people want their child to be with a neighbor or a friend rather than with a larger provider," he said. "One way to think about a distribution of services is that they feed different needs, so it's not necessarily a bad thing to have unregulated providers."

But Marx also said, "It's important to ratchet up the care provided to everyone," which is one long-term function of the study. "We want to build a system that will raise all boats."

Shri Ramakrishnan, the statewide recruitment coordinator who is located at the UA, said that to improve service, information specific to Arizona families – not simply nationwide figures – is essential.

Another important measure will be understanding how services affect learning and health outcomes of children, Ramakrishnan said. Evaluators are also considering the social and emotional well-being of youth.

Malofeeva said, once completed, the Longitudinal Child Study of Arizona will provide important information to FTF, government agencies, providers and others: "We hope that policy decisions to increase the quality of early childhood services and access to these services will be based facts and not just opinions."